

Polaris Translations



Tank Minus Two

Kumagawa Misogi's Unusual Temperature Difference

1

Heya, Kumagawa-kun. Good work out there.

Did you have fun getting to blow a girl's brains out?

But, more than anything, I'm glad you were able to safely get my message from that Teppou girl—for a moment, I'd been worrying about how it would turn out, but since it made its way over to you, I suppose we can call this a pre-established harmony.

No, I really do think that.

Basically, if we were to do a simple “comparison” of your ability levels, then it should have been impossible for you to win over that terminal of mine named Teppou Uchi—or to say it how you would say it, *screw over*.

Impossible, in the same way that a penguin or an ostrich can't fly in the sky—and I was the one that established that power balance, that game balance, as the gamemaster, so it's definitely not wrong.

But even so, you produced results—and while they were results that were hard to classify as a victory, and while they could really be considered more of a loss, you still managed to overpower her.

Well, of course, it's fine in the world of poker or mahjong—it's a perfectly

valid strategy to earn chips or scoring sticks by bluffing your way around your opponents when you have garbage hands or *noten riichi*.

But in the real world, the weak are usually the ones that get exploited—the weak are just constantly deceived by the strong. That is our reality, our world, our history, and our humanity.

The weak are weak because they're weak.

The strong are strong because they're strong.

And logic cannot overcome that.

You could say it's kind of like how all streams flow from mountains to the sea—but of course, that's why I have an interest in you.

The way it's in your personality to go up against the main premise of this world is what draws my interest—including me wondering how long you'll be able to keep it up.

In Hakobune Middle School, the reason I stuck to you, the Student Council President, as the Vice President of the Student Council Executive Committee was of course because of that—I was essentially in the same position as Maguro-kun, who wanted to know what the limits of humans were.

You've managed to guess what I'm getting at, right?

Although, not being able to guess could be what makes you, you.

In any case, this time around, what I'd like to test with this game is how far it can go—the defeatism of the boy named Kumagawa Misogi.

In other words, Kumagawa-kun.

It's a game to see how far you will continue to lose.

But, of course, you may think this isn't very much different from the pranks I've played on you before, and you may think that "continuing to lose" is just an equal, normal part of everyday life.

No matter how strong an enemy I prepare and provide to my beloved Kumagawa-kun, you'll probably just brush it off as being "the same as

ever"—and it would be very lacking in entertainment value.

But no need to lose your peace of mind (since I'm Anshin'in-san).

Even though you're someone that betrays my expectations, I won't be someone that betrays yours—naturally, I've come up with a plan.

As for what exactly that plan is, that's a secret—for now. Because if I told you right now, it would just be spoilers.

And so, what might my plan be?

If you're interested, then go and see what happens tomorrow.

But if there's one thing I want to declare in advance in order to fan the flames of your expectations, it would be that, Kumagawa-kun, right now, I'm very serious.

So I have every intention of clearly differentiating between me as I am right now and the aforementioned "pranks I've played on you before"—and there's a huge difference. I'm willing to completely crush the way of life of the human known as Kumagawa Misogi.

How long will you be able to stay as Kumagawa Misogi?

That's what I'd like to confirm.

You know about the paradox of the heap, right?

From a heap of sand, if you go through the simple act of removing one grain of sand at a time, at what point does that heap cease to be a heap—a heap with one or two grains of sand removed can still be called a heap, but if there's only one or two grains left, you can't really call that a heap. But what about if there's only half of the original heap? Or even one-fourth?

It's the same as that.

To resolve this paradox, it becomes necessary to be able to strictly define what a heap of sand is, and, in the exact same way, I'd like to define you.

What defines Kumagawa Misogi as Kumagawa Misogi—what is it that you hold that makes you, you? That's what I'd like to define. Although

you'd probably insist that you don't have anything like a definition.

For example.

I believe that your identity is made up of "unhappiness", but what happens when you stop being "unhappy"—when you become "happy", can you really still be called "you"?

It's that kind of thing.

By the way, Kumagawa-kun, there's something I want to ask. This is just something that that Teppou girl told me offhandedly that I just wanted to nitpick, but I heard that when you visited her in the classroom, you apparently weren't alone?

Apparently, you were with another girl.

Isn't that a rare sight?

For you to actually make a friend—what was her name again?

Sukinasaki Saki—

■ ■ ■

「...Saki-chan. Do you have any medicine for headaches?」

It was early morning of the day after the forceful termination of the explosive conquest in Russian Roulette against Class 2-3 seat number 18, Teppou Uchi-san.

As part of our duties, Kumagawa-kun and I had come to school early to do our Student Council work, but after Kumagawa-kun finished up his assigned tasks, he went to lie down exhaustedly on the sofa in the Student Council office, and spoke the above.

I'd been sure that he was just suffering from a lack of sleep after having woken up so early, but it seemed that wasn't the case—seeing the way

he was pressing down on his forehead, it seemed his head actually did hurt.

“If you’re asking about headache medicine… Shouldn’t there be some if you go to the infirmary?”

「Mm…」

Kumagawa-kun avoided giving a clear response.

Apparently going to the infirmary was too bothersome for him.

He was like a child that didn’t want to go to the hospital—it seemed like even Kumagawa-kun was a bit passive when he wasn’t in good condition (although he was more like a child than anything), and I could perhaps even say it was almost endearing of him, getting a smile out of me.

“If it hurts that much, then maybe you should just go home for today? You’ve done all the work you need to, too. I can do everything that needs to be done after school on my own.”

And thinking about how it made me smile led to me saying such benevolent things—but Kumagawa-kun was there to bluntly trample on my benevolence, on the kindness of humans.

「I’m not going,」 said Kumagawa-kun, shaking his head at my considerate proposal. 「If I leave now, what will become of this academy?」

“Um, I don’t think anything will happen to this place just because you left early for one day, Kumagawa-kun…”

Well, since he would actually be leaving before even sitting in class, he’d be marked as absent instead of leaving early.

「It can’t be helped. I have no choice but to lie here and rest on this sofa until after school.」

“.....”

Then wouldn’t it absolutely be more rational to just go back home, was what I was thinking, but at this point, it would be wrong to expect

rationality or consistency from Kumagawa-kun. And the same could be said for reason or humanity.

“I didn’t know you liked school that much, Kumagawa-kun.”

〔Ha ha ha. School is the one oasis in this tough, desert-like world, after all. If possible, I’d love to spend my life on school grounds until I’m 100 years old.〕

“Sounds like a pain.”

〔I’d love to build a penthouse on top of the roof and live there.〕

“Sounds like a crime.”

〔I’d love it if I were buried in the schoolyard.〕

“Sounds like a ghost story.”

Or rather.

“Ah, I see. Could it be that you’re not going home because of your plans after school? Since you got that message from Teppou-san yesterday.”

After all that happened, Kumagawa-kun had used “All Fiction” to return Teppou-san to the “state” she’d been in prior to the revolver going off, and he’d finally gotten to hear the message from “Anshin’in-san”—fortunately, Teppou-san didn’t resist any further and conveyed it properly to Kumagawa-kun—just before 6 p.m., when school closed for the day.

It had been just after the “go-home music” had played from the broadcast room that Kumagawa-kun said, 〔Mm, then the game starts tomorrow, huh?〕, and started on his way home.

I didn’t think he’d go as far as being considerate of school closing for the day, after going through the development of shooting off a gun in a school, but surprisingly, much like a Student Council President, Kumagawa-kun properly followed the rules in that respect.

It was way too random as to when he’d follow the rules and when he’d break them, and because his actions were so hard to read, it would probably be even more of a pain to try and take him on as an opponent.

Since I had been present at the scene, I had also ended up being a recipient of Teppou-san's message, but I couldn't possibly just remain at school and operate on my own, so I went back home when Kumagawa-kun did—all the while thinking, it's going to be pretty intense tomorrow, too.

“...If it's about Teppou-san's message, there's no need to expect it to happen today, right? It could be tomorrow, or even the day after.”

〔There's no way I can do that... Since I'll be rushed along in my dreams in the end. That's the reason for this headache. Every night, I'm getting so naggingly pestered in my dreams, so it's hard for me.〕

Kumagawa-kun was once again saying something incomprehensible.

Although it wasn't like Kumagawa-kun had ever said anything that I could comprehend.

〔She hadn't been such a sadistic character in the past... What happened to the kind and considerate Anshin'in-san that everybody loved...〕

“.....?”

He was giving off a rather timid aura, which was unusual for him.

Well, regardless of timidity or bravery, it did seem that whenever Kumagawa-kun spoke the name of that “Anshin'in-san”, whether it was that person's real name or a nickname, the aura about him changed.

For Kumagawa-kun, who repeatedly walked the tightrope of human relations in an outrageous manner, I never expected that there'd be a person that could change his aura in such a way—well, it made me feel a bit complex.

Perhaps they weren't a human at all.

Perhaps they were even someone outside the realm of humanity.

“I don't really get it, but in other words, you're getting a headache as a result of the bad dreams you've been having?”

「Well, that's close enough. If I have to describe it, it's like there's a tiny person living in my head, trying to spoon out my eyeballs.」

“Spoon out your eyeballs, you say...”

Where did I hear that again?

Wasn't that the worst possible way to describe a headache, that could even be called a cluster headache...? If so, I highly doubted that it was something that would go away by just sleeping.

He shouldn't just go back home. It would be better if he went to the hospital—although, even if this weren't the problem, it would be better if Kumagawa-kun went to the hospital in general.

“Well, either way, it's not something you can easily cure just by going to the hospital... It's really something that makes you feel the limits of modern medicine, huh.”

「So you've come to the same conclusion, too, Saki-chan.」

And with that, Kumagawa-kun extended an arm from the sofa, grabbed the copy of Weekly Shonen Jump that was on the nearby table, opened it to a page in the middle, and placed it on his face.

To even use Weekly Shonen Jump as an eye mask.

His actions were really brimming with love.

「I would like to offer my congratulations from the bottom of my heart—that is, if I had a heart.」

“.....”

Well, it really seemed like he didn't, though.

I felt sorry for saying it, but it really seemed like he didn't.

「Well, if I can clear the game, I'm sure this headache will go away. And once the headache goes away, then in the same way broken bones grow stronger when they heal, maybe my brain will end up becoming a little more decent.」

“If something like that was true, then I’d also like to offer congratulations from the bottom of my heart... Since it’s not my problem, I’m even starting to hope for it a little. Really, it’s only a little...”

Incidentally, even so.

The idea that broken bones grew stronger when they healed was just an urban legend—so my hopes had already been dashed by science.

In that case, I wanted to at least pray that Kumagawa-kun’s headache lasted even a bit longer, but, well, I wasn’t the kind of person who would have such inhumane thoughts.

“Then... It’s fine if I just come by after school, right?”

〔Right. And after we finish all our work, let’s go together, Saki-chan.〕

Kumagawa-kun laughed listlessly.

〔To find the ‘Hero’s Sword’.〕

■ ■

The Hero’s Sword.

Yesterday after school, Teppou-san, who had just been “restored” from the serious burns and injuries she’d been inflicted with on her upper body, had said that to Kumagawa-kun.

“It’s the Hero’s Sword, Kumagawa-senpai.”

〔.....?〕

Even Kumagawa-kun couldn’t help but tilt his head at these sudden words.

“Are we talking about some sort of RPG game...?”

Because it felt awkward keeping quiet, I tossed out that line to Teppou-san—it was hard to think that, after playing Russian Roulette with a revolver, we’d jump to talking about a video game, but from what I knew,

anything about a “Hero” generally had to do with RPG games.

“Upupu. That ain’t it, Sukinasaki-senpai.”

It was as if Teppou-san was making fun of me.

Even though she had nearly been dead just moments ago, her cheekiness was as strong as ever—it seemed idiocy wasn’t the only thing that didn’t go away when you died.

〔Saki-chan, when you say ‘RPG game’, you’re repeating the word ‘game’ that’s already in the acronym.〕

“.....”

And Kumagawa-kun was just nitpicking.

All right, then I’ll just shut up now, was how I felt, sulking and deciding to just quietly watch over their conversation instead.

〔The ‘Hero’s Sword’—is that the message that Anshin’in-san wanted to give to me?〕

“That’s exactly it. And before you ask, she didn’t give me any other messages after that. Kumagawa-senpai, the message that Anshin’in-san sent you is, ‘Find the “Hero’s Sword”’!—and that’s it.”

“.....”

Find the “Hero’s Sword”!

Even the exclamation point at the end seemed like a quest in a game, though...

How serious was this “Anshin’in-san” or whatever? It did seem a lot like she was just playing around with Kumagawa-kun, though...

〔Guessing from the direction this conversation is going, is it safe to assume that that ‘Hero’s Sword’ or whatever is somewhere within Suisou Academy? Is it safe to assume Anshin’in-san is telling me to go find it somewhere in here?〕

“You’re free to assume whatever you want. Well, Anshin’in-san is the one

that thinks that too much freedom can make a game boring, so if it were up to me, I'd interpret it as the game field being limited to the grounds of Suisou Academy.”

「……」

Kumagawa-kun seemed to stop to think.

He was probably ruminating over whether or not Teppou-san was trying to pull a fast one on him—but Kumagawa-kun probably wouldn't be deceived by such psychological warfare at this point.

「Okay, then I'll just think like that,」 he said, with his judgment being that it was probably true, which was also what I'd thought. 「Saki-chan, it's getting late today, so tomorrow after school—come along with me. Since I'm still not used to this academy yet, so I barely know where anything is in this school, let alone the 'Hero's Sword'. I don't even know right from left.」

With that, after finishing up today's lessons—and after Kumagawa-kun rested just like that in the Student Council office—after school, we once again joined up at the Student Council office. And, after handling a few more matters, we started off on our trip in search for the 'Hero's Sword', much like characters in an RPG game (and I wasn't going to correct it. RPG games were RPG games).

“...Thinking about it, a 'Hero's Sword' isn't exactly an item that suits you, huh.”

「Saki-chan, you didn't even have to say that for me to be aware of it, though.」

It seemed there had been some value in skipping all his classes, as his condition had more or less improved, but still, he most likely wasn't at full health, as his tone of voice was still a little frail.

「It can't be helped. That in itself is probably how Anshin'in-san is harassing me.」

“Harassing? Is she the kind of person that harasses people, that 'Anshin'in-san'? ”

「Well, she's certainly not the kind of person that doesn't—so yeah. She's the kind of person that enjoys making her friends wear clothes that don't suit them.」

“Isn't that awful...”

Making people wear clothes that don't suit them.

So that tendency of hers was manifesting as making Kumagawa-kun “wield an item that didn't suit him”.

Although her objective was still unknown, and it didn't seem like Kumagawa-kun was going to go into detail about this “Anshin'in-san” at all—and I had no plans to dig into Kumagawa-kun's life and no plans to get deeply involved in this matter, either, so it didn't matter to me.

「So, Saki-chan. Any ideas?」

“Huh?”

「I'm asking if you have any ideas regarding the 'Hero's Sword'.」

“Of course I wouldn't...? Eh, did you perhaps think that I actually had any ideas?”

「You know everything about this school, though, don't you, Saki-chan?」

“How much are you overestimating me... That's too much of an overestimation. It's true that I'd done something along the lines of cooperating with Jakago-san before, but that was only a little bit. Really, it was only just a little.”

「Is that so? Then that's fine, too.」

Kumagawa-kun abruptly pulled back.

Had he been asking a leading question?

If so, it was a little too broad for a leading question... It didn't seem like something Kumagawa-kun would do, after having cornered Teppou-san with incorrect probability theory.

〔Then, where should we start looking... This academy is surprisingly large, after all, despite the number of students actually attending.〕

“Since it’s apparently a ‘sword’, shouldn’t we be looking somewhere like the *Kendo* Club room or the dojo? Although that’s a pretty normal way of thinking.”

〔The *Kendo* Club only has katanas, right? Whether they’re made of bamboo or wood... They’re not swords.〕

“Hm? What’s the difference between a sword and a katana?”

〔A sword has two edges, while a katana has one—that’s the general idea of it.〕

“I see...”

I nodded, pretending that I was convinced, but there was no way I’d believe any factoids that Kumagawa-kun spouted off. After all, it was very much a Kumagawa-kun-like thing to do to spout such reasonable-sounding lies like this for no reason.

“But, ignoring wooden katanas, bamboo katanas are round, so couldn’t you say they have two edges?”

〔No, no, even bamboo katanas have a proper top and bottom. You can tell by the string. The side with the string is the edge, so even if you manage to land a hit with the wrong side, it won’t count as a hit.〕

“Then why is it called *kendo*, the ‘way of the sword’? Shouldn’t it be called the ‘way of the katana’?”

〔Well, I’m sure there was some guy like me that misunderstood something somewhere.〕

“.....”

So in the end, he just handwaved it, huh.

“Suisou Academy also has an *iaido* Club—but in *iaido*, they also use katanas, right? They use Japanese swords.”

〔Well, for them, apparently they don’t have such a strict definition, and in

terms of the dictionary they can use both swords and katanas, so I'm not unwilling to go check their club activities out. But since I'm a pretty contrary kind of guy, I'd rather approach this from a different perspective than starting from such an obvious place.]

His reasoning was all over the place, which made it very much something he would say—it seemed like he'd fully recover from his headache and return to full health very soon.

“In that case, how should we approach this?”

「How about the girls' locker room?」

With that, Kumagawa-kun began to walk down the hallway.

If he really was going to perform such an investigation, then I had to stop him even at the risk of my own life... Fortunately, Kumagawa-kun went past the door in question, descended the stairs, and left the school building.

Even though he asked me to accompany him as his guide around the school, it seemed he was fine moving around on his own—well, this degree of selfishness could be called a Kumagawaism.

Or did he have a definite destination in mind? Other than the girls' locker room...

“But really, after using a pistol in Russian Roulette, we now have a sword called the 'Hero's Sword'... I wonder if there's a connection.”

「Maybe. It could be interesting if we discovered that it was something story-like, but it's hard to say with only two keywords—in the first place, Saki-chan, what do we need to do for this game to end, again?」

“Eh? That's, finding the 'Hero's Sword', right?”

「No, surely that isn't just the end of the game—swords are meant to cut things down, aren't they? In other words, Anshin'in-san, as the gamemaster, probably wants me to use that 'Hero's Sword' to cut something down.」

I see.

Now that I thought about it, that made sense—since she was having us look for it like this, perhaps we were supposed to see it as something to be used for some purpose.

Well, since just getting to the start of the game was already pretty intense, it definitely wouldn't just end with just looking for something... Unfortunately, that meant that the road ahead of us was going to be pretty long.

“But I wonder what that something is?”

「Who knows. We'll probably only learn that after we find the 'Hero's Sword'—although it's not like we can't guess right now. Perhaps, if Anshin'in-san is trying to do something like make me wear clothes that don't suit me,」 said Kumagawa-kun.

In a rather annoying manner.

「If she's trying to make me play the role of a 'Hero'—then a natural opponent that I need to cut down comes to mind.」

“.....”

The implications were astounding.

An enemy that a Hero would cut down would obviously have to be a great Demon Lord, but I could hardly think that things would proceed in such a fantasy-like direction, and something that I absolutely would never have guessed at.

But it would be rude to press Kumagawa-kun on this matter now, and possibly even offensive. In the first place, there was the possibility that he was just going to stop at the implication, so perhaps it would be auspicious to ignore it.

“So, Kumagawa-kun. Where are we heading now? Since it doesn't seem like you're particularly hesitating in your footsteps.”

Instead, I changed the subject with that question.

“Kumagawa-kun, do you perhaps have an idea of your own? Regarding the location of the 'Hero's Sword'.”

「I don't have any ideas. I don't have any familiarity with this place, either. It's just that I do have some knowledge of Anshin'in-san—so I can more or less read her habits.」

“Habits?”

「Yep. Kind of like that tendency of hers I mentioned earlier, I suppose? I can read them even better than Teppou-chan, who is one of Anshin'in-san's terminals—although I can't deny that Anshin'in-san is probably intentionally making it easy to read her.」

“...Then isn't she just making you into one of her toys?”

「That could be it. I'm just one of Anshin'in-san's toys that she's playing around with. Like, *se se se no yoi yoi yoi, ocharaka hoi.*」

“.....”

It seemed Kumagawa-kun had said it as a joke, but unfortunately, that sort of rhythmic chanting was not said while playing around with any toys. It was something that kids chanted when playing rock-paper-scissors.

「But I have no intention of ending up as a simple toy—and I plan on making sure that she knows that. After all, toys can sometimes bite the hand that plays with them.」

As if that “sometimes” even happened!

What kind of toys would they be!?

“But anyways, I wonder when that person even hid something like the 'Hero's Sword' in Suisou Academy? She must have made preparations for this game at least a couple days in advance—perhaps that could be useful as a hint in figuring out where it's hidden.”

「Unfortunately, Anshin'in-san isn't someone that's restricted to the confines of time. She's someone that can make as many alibis as she wants. I wouldn't even be surprised if she set this up a hundred years ago.」

“A hundred years ago...”

But Suisou Academy didn't even exist at that point.

I was surprised at how far back he'd gone, even for a joke.

“...Um, Kumagawa-kun.”

We'd been walking for several minutes after leaving the building—at this point, it wasn't hard at all for me to guess at where Kumagawa-kun was going to approach first. If we kept going in this direction, then we could only end up “there”.

At “that facility”.

“Um, it's not a good idea. Right now, they should be having club activities over 'there'... And it's forbidden for anyone to observe those club activities outside of any related parties.”

Even members of the Student Council Executive Committee were still outsiders when it came to those club activities—I doubted they'd let us in as an exception.

So if he still wanted to go, then it would have to be just before school closed, when the members of the club were leaving—

〔Don't worry, and rest assured, Saki-chan. Not even I spent all day stylishly asleep in the Student Council office, you know.〕

“Well, of course, something that uncool couldn't have been stylish at all... Eh? Then, what were you doing?”

〔I put out an order to halt those club activities for today.〕

“.....”

It was an oppressive decree.

A tyrannical act that reminded me of Former President Jakago.

If so, even if we continued on like this, there wouldn't be any problems—even if we went to “that place”.

Even if we went to the pool.

...But why did Kumagawa-kun think that the “Hero’s Sword” was in a place like that?

■ ■ ■

I decided to come back and apologize to everyone in the Swim Club later—as Kumagawa-kun predicted, Suisou Academy’s 25-meter pool was completely unattended.

Of course, since the Swim Club used the pool every day, it was full to the brim with water—and it seemed Kumagawa-kun believed that the “Hero’s Sword” was somewhere at the bottom of this pool.

“At the bottom of the pool... I can’t see it, though.”

No matter how hard I looked from the side of the pool, I couldn’t see anything, or rather, since the rays of the sun were brilliantly shining down on us, the surface of the pool reflected the light like a mirror, so the bottom of the pool could barely be seen.

And so.

「There’s no other option but to dive in,」 said Kumagawa-kun.

He’d completely devoted himself to doing his stretches beside me—one-and-two-and-three-and-four, he counted, stretching his Achilles tendons.

「Normally, this would have been a fanservice scene where you would change into a swimsuit and take on this job instead, but unfortunately, it didn’t seem like you brought along your swimsuit with you.」

“Well, I certainly didn’t, but...”

You didn’t have your swimsuit, either, did you?

He was doing his stretches in his uniform, but what was he planning? He surely wasn’t going to swim naked, was he...

“Or rather, I wouldn’t do it even if I did bring it, okay? And I wouldn’t put on a bikini, either, okay?”

「I didn't ask you to wear a bikini, though.」

“But, Kumagawa-kun, why the pool?”

「Hm?」

“I'm asking why you chose the *Swim Club* first, over the *Kendo Club* or the *Iaido Club*. Even going as far as sending out an order to halt their activities...”

「I happen to know a few of the words that Anshin'in-san likes, you see—and among those words is this.」

Kumagawa-kun spoke even as he continued his stretches.

It seemed he was actually going to properly explain it for once.

「Since you're rather studious, I'm sure you've heard it before, too. It's a phrase that shows up in classical Chinese texts, 'kè zhōu qiú jiàn'.」

“*Kè zhōu qiú jiàn*'...”

Well, I had heard it before.

In Japanese, it was an idiom that literally meant “marking a ship to look for a sword”—a term from the *Lüshi Chunqiu*. I didn't remember when I learned it exactly, but it was probably during Japanese class in middle school.

「Splendid. Do you remember what the story behind it was?」

“Yeah...”

I wasn't confident in the details.

But the general idea of it should be correct.

Once upon a time, a man crossing the Yangtze River by boat accidentally dropped a treasured sword that he owned into the river—and the sword sunk like that down to the riverbed. Panicking, the man quick-wittedly carved a mark on the side of the boat, saying, “This mark will tell me where I dropped the sword”—

「Right. That's about the gist of it.」 said Kumagawa-kun, nodding.

Well, it was possible that it wasn't a nod but just a part of his neck stretches.

「And the mysterious part of this story is, how did the man manage to carve a mark into the boat after losing his sword?」

"Um, that's not really all that mysterious..."

「So is the moral of the story that we should always carry two swords with us?」

"Of course not... In the first place, I don't think this is supposed to be a story that has a moral. If anything, it's just a funny story where you go, 'Even if you make a mark, the boat's still moving, right?' and laugh."

After all, even if the boat stayed still, and even if the mark did actually mark where the sword was, it wasn't exactly possible to retrieve a sword from the bottom of the Yangtze River anyway.

"So, what about it?"

「Like I said, Anshin'in-san happens to like this particular episode—and Teppou-san didn't give us any more hints after telling us to look for the 'Hero's Sword', right? She told us to look for it with no hints, right?」

"She did... And?"

「When she told us to look for a sword without any hints or signs, I couldn't help but be reminded of that idiom, you see. And so, it made me want to search in the water. Since there's no way there could be a river flowing through a school, then why not a pool?」

"....."

I was astounded.

In the end, wasn't that all just speculation?

It could hardly be called a deduction—it was a deduction as shallow as the shallow end of a pool.

“Well, I guess... Since we have no hints, it doesn’t really matter where we start looking from... And for now, there’s no evidence that it’s *not* at the bottom of the pool.”

However, if Kumagawa-kun had not put out the order to halt club activities, then the Swim Club would have convened today as usual, and if there really was a sword here, then that sword would certainly have been discovered by someone from the Swim Club.

Wouldn’t that be inconvenient for that “Anshin’in-san”? Or maybe it just didn’t matter to her if that happened?

I had no idea.

〔All right, then I’ll just go for a quick dip.〕

It seemed he was planning on swimming in his uniform.

Did he know the proper procedures for swimming with clothes on?

Well, it was better than him going naked.

I was sure he’d try to look cool by diving off of a diving board, but instead, Kumagawa-kun crouched down at the side of the pool and dipped his feet in first.

Of course, he’d already taken his socks and shoes off at the entrance.

From there, Kumagawa-kun gradually went from his legs, to his stomach, to his chest, allowing his body to get used to the temperature of the water.

That’s correct!

That’s the correct way to do it, but it’s really lame!

〔It would have been easier to look if I had goggles—but oh well, I can still handle it. I have 20/4 vision, after all.〕

Why bother telling such an obvious lie?

“If we’re just looking for the sword, why not just empty the water from the pool?”

〔That would just make the water bill ridiculously expensive. How much water do you think it takes to fill an entire pool? Please consider the academy's budget a little, Saki-chan.〕

“Well, I’m not the Treasurer, so...”

〔Also, while we’re draining the pool, it’s not impossible for the sword to flow out with the water, too.〕

“A sword isn’t going to ‘flow’!”

〔You never know! It could be a really tiny sword. She’s the kind of person to play such mean tricks, after all, that Anshin'in-san.〕

This person was becoming more and more incomprehensible.

I didn’t think I wanted to meet her, but hearing this much, I did become a little interested.

〔All right, then keep a lookout, okay?〕

“Keep a lookout... It’s not like we’re doing anything to feel guilty about. If we’re discovered by a teacher or someone, we can just say we’re looking for something.”

Well, I suppose invoking such an oppressive decree could be considered something to feel guilty about, but at the very least, we’d have a better excuse for this than if we’d been discovered playing Russian Roulette with a kouhai.

〔Not that, not that,〕 said Kumagawa-kun, waving his hand. 〔I’m asking you to keep a lookout to make sure I’m not drowning. If I end up limply bobbing up to the surface, it’s your job to pull me out of the water and do chest compressions and artificial respiration.〕

“Eh... Do you not know the proper procedures for swimming with clothes on!?”

〔It’ll be fine.〕

Kumagawa-kun went to the center of the pool.

「Just sinking to the bottom should be easy enough.」

■ ■ ■

“So it seems that he entered with his clothes on in order to 'sink faster'—he really doesn't think anything of his own life, this new Student Council President-dono.”

At the same time Kumagawa-kun disappeared underneath the water, a voice spoke from behind me—I turned quickly in surprise.

The one standing there was a girl in a swimsuit.

I remembered seeing her before—Utsubogi-san from the Swim Club.

Class 1-3, seat number 23.

Swim Club member, Utsubogi Mei.

“Utsubogi-san...”

Instinctively trying to remain calm even in my state of confusion, I greeted the girl who'd suddenly appeared before me.

“Eh, um... What is it? I thought the Swim Club wasn't scheduled to meet today.”

If anything, it was us in the Student Council that put out the order to halt those activities, but I just decided to play dumb for now.

“I didn't come here as a member of the Swim Club, you see—Sukinasaki-senpai.”

“.....”

A cool expression with a cool tone of voice.

She seemed like someone with an awfully low body temperature.

Unlike Teppou-san, from the Marksmanship Club, she wasn't particularly considered a celebrity around the school, and she wasn't a student that the Jakago administration particularly had their eyes on—even within the Swim Club, it seemed like she was treated as a substitute.

Nevertheless, she became well-known among the people that knew her due to her apathetic beauty—really, even as her upperclassman, looking at her in her swimsuit like this made me feel a bit embarrassed for myself.

“Well, even so... Even though everything he does is absurd, nothing stands to reason, and nothing follows any sort of logic, it's still pretty impressive. To think he'd read Anshin'in-san's thoughts with a single try... It seemed like Teppou-san was looking down on him by quite a bit, so I'd better make sure I don't fall into the same rut.”

“.....”

That name.

“Anshin'in-san” had come up again.

...Then, that meant that Utsubogi-san, like Teppou-san, was one of her—what was it again, “terminals”? Something like her “underlings”, I guess.

In that case, it wasn't that she'd just arrived at the pool and spoke to me just by chance, but that she'd been monitoring me and Kumagawa-kun from even earlier.

“Well, at least in the Swim Club, whether or not we even have ruts, it's not like we walk on the ground, anyway.”

Apathetically adding that thought, she turned her eyes to the pool—fortunately (or rather, it would be a disaster if it actually happened), it didn't seem like Kumagawa-kun was limply bobbing up towards the surface.

He must still be searching the bottom of the pool.

“If Kumagawa-senpai ended up never reaching the pool, then I was told to recover the 'Hero's Sword' myself. Well, it ended up being a useless

concern... Anshin'in-san can be pretty fussy about these things."

"....."

Ah, so there was an arrangement like that.

But with Teppou-san and now Utsubogi-san, just how many people did Anshin'in-san have as her subordinates in this academy?

"So, Utsubogi-san. Are you saying that the 'Hero's Sword' actually is at the bottom of this pool, just like Kumagawa-kun deduced?"

"Indeed. He was spot on. He really is impressive—and Kumagawa-kun really does like Anshin'in-san, doesn't he. For him to immediately think of one of Anshin'in-san's favorite terms, '*kè zhōu qíú jiàn*'."

"Like'...?"

The word made me feel extremely uncomfortable.

It was true that Kumagawa-kun himself had said something along those lines, but I'd assumed it had just been a passing remark, and he actually held some hostility towards Anshin'in-san—was it even possible for Kumagawa-kun, *that* Kumagawa Misogi, to actually like someone in the truest sense of the word?

Even though he's a guy that expresses hate for the world as easily as he breathes.

"Then, your mission, I guess I could call it? Your mission was over the moment Kumagawa-kun exerted his power as the Student Council President to halt the Swim Club's activities, wouldn't you say?"

"Mm..."

Utsubogi-san looked at me rather warily—uh-oh, I may have said a bit too much despite my position as the General Affairs Manager, or despite my position as an outsider in this game.

I tried to think of a way to recover from my careless remark, but it seemed Utsubogi-san didn't distrust me that much, as she replied, "No, that was just half of it."

Although, it wasn't a reply that I wanted to hear.

"There's no way him just finding the 'Hero's Sword' would be the end."

"So it's not the end? Huh? Utsubogi-san, what do you—"

"Um."

Before I was able to carelessly ask another question, Utsubogi-san raised her palm to stop me. I'd thought for sure that I had gone too far this time, but that wasn't the case, as she instead used that hand to point at the pool.

"Kumagawa-senpai hasn't come back to the surface for a while now."

"Eh? No, no, please don't say something so unsettling, Utsubogi-san. Even if Kumagawa-kun is really better off dead, it would be awful if he turned into a corpse limply bobbing up to the surface."

"Kumagawa-kun is better off dead, you say..."

It seemed Utsubogi-san was rendered momentarily speechless at the inadvertent slip of the tongue that I'd made, but she regained the coolness that was characteristic of her.

"No, it's true that he didn't bob up limply... But he hasn't come up even once for air, either."

"Eh?"

"It's been over ten minutes since he went under."

"Eh?"

■ ■ ■

Are you an idiot?

Don't just go and die on your own outside of my expectations. Don't go and drown.

How passionate are you about this game to forget to even breathe?
Although that passion does make me happy, you idiot.

It's because you went swimming with your clothes on that you sank.

And it just made it harder to find the sword.

Actually, you shouldn't even be going swimming with a bad headache—
really, is that what you think of your own life?

Good grief.

But anyway, more than anything, I'm glad you were able to find the
'Hero's Sword' at the bottom of the pool—well, it would've been a pain if
you stumbled there, so if it came down to it I would've ordered that
Utsubogi girl to get into contact with you, but it seems like I didn't need to
worry about that.

Well, I'm someone whose purpose in life is to worry needlessly about
things, so it's fine with me—even though you suck at thinking
theoretically, you surprisingly have a keen nose for treasure hunts like
this, huh.

Ah, Utsubogi is another one of my terminals.

One of my seven hundred million terminals, Utsubogi Mei.

A student of Suisou Academy, Class 1-3, seat number 23—she's at the
side of the pool right now, so you can just have her introduce herself to
you then. I'm really just tooting my own horn here, but she's a very cute
little girl. She's a cute girl that's in a swimsuit, so go on and revive
already.

Jeez, even though something like "reviving" is supposed to be impossible
with a Skill, it's really like you to have a cheat-like Skill in "All Fiction" that
makes that possible—although, you're going to complain at me claiming
that something is "like you", huh?

Well, it's not just you.

Everyone always seems to worry about what is "like them"—each of them
wants to keep their own individual personality fixed.

Unlike me, they don't try to have an infinite number of personalities.

And that's what's so mysterious for me—and that's why I'm holding this experiment, that's why I'm running this game.

I'll have you play along, all right?

If you die like this now, it's really a pain.

All right, wake up already and let's continue.

Now that you've found the "Hero's Sword", you should already understand *what it is you absolutely must do*, right?

By the way, that Utsubogi girl will be the referee, so get the detailed rules from her. You've already managed to deduce that I want you to cut "something" down using that "Hero's Sword", and I have to praise your keen insight, but—before that, there's something I'm going to need to have you do.

Since a game is all about going through the stages and leveling up, after all.

Ah, that's right, this was something that I planned on telling you through that Utsubogi girl, but seeing as we unexpectedly met "here", I may as well tell you now.

The official name of the "Hero's Sword".

Or rather, that "Hero's Sword" itself is just something I made up with my Skill, "Sword Looks"^[?], so it doesn't have anything like legends or folklore.

So I just named it whatever I wanted.

The name of that sword is—

■ ■ ■

"Kumagawa-kun! Kumagawa-kun! Wake up!"

Usubogi-san had moved quickly in regards to Kumagawa-kun, who hadn't come up once for air in pursuit of the "Hero's Sword".

Though it wasn't off the diving board, she impressively and beautifully dove into the water, entering with her hands first—and, under the water, she shouldered Kumagawa-kun's limp, unmoving body and carried him up to the side of the pool.

Kumagawa-kun's body wasn't particularly large for a guy, but for her to be able to bear his weight, including the water his clothes had absorbed—students in sports club really were amazing.

It didn't look like she'd used a Skill, so she must have relied on strength alone—I guess not all underlings of this "Anshin'in-san" necessarily possess a Skill. Although, it could be the pattern where she does have a Skill that just wasn't usable in this situation, so I shouldn't make any hasty judgments...

In any case, I called out to Kumagawa-kun, who was collapsed on the floor.

"Kumagawa-kun! Kumagawa-kun!"

"I don't think there's any point in calling his name... He's completely lost consciousness, and he's not even breathing. His heart has stopped beating, too—to get straight to the point, he's dead."

"Dead..."

"I've heard from Teppou-san, but this guy really does die just like that, huh... But there's no need to worry. Though I called him dead, he's most likely in a state of suspended animation, so if we just perform artificial respiration—"

"Kumagawa-kun! Wake up! I'm not going to perform artificial respiration, but wake up!"

"....."

Usubogi-san stayed silent for a moment before continuing.

"There's no need to worry. Even if he's in suspended animation or

whatever, Kumagawa Misogi isn't the kind of guy that kicks the bucket even when he dies. That's what I heard from Anshin'in-san."

And, with one of her bare feet, she stepped on Kumagawa-kun's chest—yes, she stepped on it.

And that step had quite the merciless power behind it.

I could almost hear his ribs creaking.

〔Cough.〕

As if he were a plastic bottle with some water still inside that had just been crushed, Kumagawa-kun spit out some water from within his body.

〔Co-cough... Uh, huh? I'm being stepped on by a beautiful girl in a swimsuit? Was this supposed to be that kind of game?〕

What kind of a game was that supposed to be.

At that point, it was no longer gameplay. It was eroplay.

But anyway, it seemed Kumagawa-kun had been revived—although whether that was due to him using "All Fiction" or due to Utsubogi-san's violent chest compressions, I had no way of knowing.

"Good. I was worried, Kumagawa-senpai."

With that, Utsubogi-san removed her bare foot from Kumagawa-kun's chest and placed that same foot right next to his face.

She was standing with her legs on both sides of Kumagawa-kun, straddling his face.

"It's very nice to meet you, Kumagawa-senpai. I am one of Anshin'in-san's terminals, Class 1-3 seat number 23, and my name is Utsubogi Mei. I belong to the Swim Club. By the way, unlike Teppou-san, I'm not a Skill Holder, so there's no need to worry."

As I thought, she didn't have a Skill—although, this was self-declared, so it wasn't good to just buy into it.

"Are you all right? When I learned I'd be coming into contact with the

rumored Kumagawa Misogi, I imagined various ways this would go about, but I never once considered that you'd end up dying before I could even greet you."

「Huhuhu. That's because you underestimated me, Utsubogi-chan,」 said Kumagawa-kun with a bold smile.

Um, when you say that while lying on the floor while completely soaked, a bold smile isn't going to make you any cooler.

「I can see that you didn't know that some of my fans call me the Nanja Monja Brothers from Lupin III.」

Um.

Not even I knew that.

It was my first time hearing that Kumagawa-kun even had fans at all, and it was my first time hearing that he was called the Nanja Monja Brothers —why was he even called brothers when he was just one person?

Or rather, in the first place, the Nanja Monja Brothers, who were rival thieves to Lupin III's grandfather, Arsene Lupin I... They couldn't possibly be famous enough to make a reference like this.

Zoi zoi, zoi zoi.^[?]

“Is that so? In that case, I'll be Clarisse.”

Utsubogi-san countered with that.

What a good role she picked!

Not just within Lupin III, but even among all of the heroines of the anime world, she had to have a high rank.

「Good grief... Even so, Anshin'in-san's terminals really have a lot of variety to them, don't they? Well, that's to be expected, considering she has 700 million of them...」

700 million?

Wait, did he just say 700 million of them?

No way, no way, I must have misheard it—I must have misheard him saying several hundred million... Wait, that didn't really make a big difference.

〔A swimsuit-clad beauty, huh? But if you could allow me to indulge just a little bit, I don't particularly happen to like competition swimsuits.〕

“That really is indulgent... Understood, I'll go and change.”

Saying that, Utsubogi-san moved her legs that were straddling Kumagawa-kun and turned just like that to head for the locker room.

It was such a fluid movement with no hesitation that there was no opportunity to stop her.

Eh? Is she really going to change?

“Kumagawa-kun... That's no good, you just hurt Utsubogi-san's feelings. Saying that she doesn't look good in a competition swimsuit.”

〔I never said she didn't look good... It's just a matter of taste,〕 said Kumagawa-kun while pushing himself up to a seated position.

Even so, it seemed that not even Kumagawa-kun expected that Utsubogi-san would simply leave as a result of his joke made in place of a greeting, because he wore a stunned expression on his face.

〔Hmm, it feels like she doesn't suit my tastes because of how practical she is. If there's no playfulness, then fashion and life are just boring. You know, for example, panties aren't really for showing them off to others, so it's just fine if they're just pieces of cloth, right? But in that case, why do they add frills and designs to them? Isn't it because they want people to play with panties?〕

“Your opinion is always welcome, but perhaps we could have this conversation at a later opportunity, President Kumagawa?”

I found myself using polite language to my classmate.

I cleared my throat and decided to start fresh.

“Anyway, was it actually at the bottom of the pool? The 'Hero's Sword'

that you were looking for.”

「It was. There’s no doubt about it,」 said Kumagawa-kun.

Mhm.

I’d heard that death by drowning was one of the most painful ways to die, but it seemed Kumagawa-kun’s drowning wasn’t for naught.

However—his mood didn’t seem to have risen.

Even though he was no longer sinking in the pool, if his mood hadn’t risen, then I had to wonder why.

「It was right in the center of the pool—but a problem seems to have come up. No, it’s more like, a trap was set.」

“A trap?”

Saying that, I realized.

If he had found the “Hero’s Sword” at the bottom of the pool—then he would have just retrieved it and come back up to the surface as soon as he found it. It wasn’t like it was a pool with a depth of 10 meters, since this was a school facility. Even the deepest part probably wasn’t more than 2 meters—if so, why had Kumagawa-kun ended up returning empty-handed?

「It was stuck.」

“Eh?”

「Like I said, it was stuck. The ‘Hero’s Sword’ was stuck into the bottom of the pool—and pretty deeply, at that.」

Kumagawa-kun used gestures to demonstrate—he laid one hand flat to represent the bottom of the pool, and used the other hand’s index finger to stab it in between the first hand’s fingers.

「—So it was stuck into it like this.」

“Stuck into it... So it wasn’t that the ‘Hero’s Sword’ was put in a scabbard and placed into the pool, but that it was actually stabbed into the

concrete?"

〔That's right. From what I could see, about half of the blade was buried in the concrete. I couldn't spot a scabbard at all—it's pretty likely that the scabbard was never 'established' in the first place.〕

"And the reason you were empty-handed... That was because you couldn't pull out the sword?"

〔Don't make it sound like I'm some kind of weakling. It's just impossible, doing something like that.〕

".....?"

Was there some sort of problem with water pressure or buoyancy?

Kumagawa-kun seemed oddly conclusive in his words.

It was true that it wouldn't be easy to pull out a sword stuck in concrete even if it wasn't in the water—or rather, in the first place, swords wouldn't be stabbed into concrete.

〔No, it doesn't have anything to do with water pressure or buoyancy... I think this setup is something Anshin'in-san is responsible for. That's why, no matter how hard I tried, it wouldn't budge an inch. Although I ended up drowning and dying as I tried. There's probably a system... No, a rule for it.〕

"A rule..."

〔Something appropriate for the 'Hero's Sword'—like, only the chosen one can pull it out.〕

Kumagawa-kun's gaze turned to the center of the pool, where the "Hero's Sword" was stabbed into.

〔So to clear Anshin'in-san's quest, 'Get the "Hero's Sword"!—I have to do something to become that chosen one. Basically, I have to become... What's it called? A 'hero'.〕

"That's exactly right."

Kumagawa-kun had said the word "hero" awkwardly, as if he was saying

the name of a sworn enemy that he couldn't forgive, and just then, Utsubogi-san returned, apparently having finished changing with perfect timing.

"That's the first quest that Anshin'in-san has prepared for you, Kumagawa-senpai—so please do your best to rack your brains as if you're wringing out a towel to pull out the sword at the bottom of the water. And I'll just say this right now, but draining the pool is cheating. If you happen to break the rules, then I won't be able to guarantee anything. Your rights, your life, anything."

"....."

「.....」

Both Kumagawa-kun and I turned to face Utsubogi-san—and were both stunned silent.

And it wasn't because we were recoiling at her manner of speech, saying that she couldn't guarantee our rights or our lives.

We were silent, we were stunned silent, because Utsubogi-san had not changed out of her stylish competition swimsuit into her school uniform. She had changed into, for some reason, something that an elementary schooler would wear—a school swimsuit with a nametag on it.





2

Putting aside Utsubogi-san's mysterious action of changing her clothes to suit Kumagawa-kun's tastes—or rather, having no other choice but to put that aside—if we were on the subject of tales about a sword that could only be pulled out (though perhaps not from concrete) by a chosen one, then there were too many to count.

Of course, the most famous of those "swords that needed to be pulled out" would have to be the one that appears in the "legends of King Arthur", the legendary sword Excalibur.

It was an episode where being able to pull out that sword was what became the evidence for King Arthur's right to the throne—incidentally, there was also the pattern of the legendary sword Excalibur having been entrusted to King Arthur by the Lady of the Lake, so it was possible that "Anshin'in-san", having been the one to place the "Hero's Sword" at the bottom of the pool, was following along those lines. Especially with "kè zhōu qiú jiàn", it seemed possible that "Anshin'in-san" was some sort of literary girl. That was what I'd been thinking, but Kumagawa-kun had this to say.

「Anshin'in-san really just likes fabricated tales that were created by humans, you see—it's not limited to books, either. With that, even movies and manga and stage plays are all things she enjoys.」

“Fabricated tales... She likes stories that were created by humans?”

「That's right. However, what Anshin'in-san likes the most are humans themselves.」

Kumagawa-kun said this unusually proudly—almost as if he made this up on the spot.

「And of course, among those humans, the one she likes the most is me.」

“That's not true.”

The one who went to the trouble of making that obvious retort was, obviously, Utsubogi-san.

“I'm not the same as Teppou-san, but I've also received a message for you from Anshin'in-san, Kumagawa-senpai. If Kumagawa-senpai says something like, 'The one Anshin'in-san likes the most is me,' then I've received orders to respond like this. 'No, I hate you, though?'”

「...You know, tsunderes make good characters because they eventually say their true feelings that they've been unable to say, don't you think?」

Though Kumagawa-kun had the peculiar personality of enjoying being hated by others, he could only respond like this to those words. Was he really that shocked?

Well, even if he was shocked, regardless of whether or not he was actually hated, it was clear that his words and actions had been completely seen through—perhaps he wasn't in his normal condition after having just come back to life.

「So, Utsubogi-chan. Did Anshin'in-san have any other words for me?」

“Well, there were a lot of things, but they all basically followed the pattern of, 'If Kumagawa-kun says this, then respond with this'. Outside of that, then it would just be the first quest.”

Utsubogi-san spoke coolly.

But no matter how coolly she spoke, it couldn't make up for the uncoolness of a school swimsuit with a nametag on it, so it was hard to relax.

Was this what Cool Japan was supposed to be about?

"Get the 'Hero's Sword'! ...That's about it."

〔And you said that draining the pool is cheating, right?〕

Kumagawa-kun spoke as he dipped a hand into the water. Splish splash, went the water as he played with it—hopefully he wasn't planning on bailing out all the water with his hands like that.

〔Why is that?〕

"Why, you ask... Well, it's because that's the rule."

〔No, isn't that a little weird? Obviously the biggest obstacle in pulling out this 'Hero's Sword' is the large amount of water in the pool, and removing that is the most logical course of action to take, so I don't understand why it's treated as cheating. So? Why is it? Why is it cheating? If you don't specify the reason for why it's considered cheating, then unfortunately I won't be able to abide by such a tyrannical rule.〕

"....."

Utsubogi-san was silent.

Rather than being silent because she was troubled, she was probably silent because of how annoying he was.

It was as if he had just learned the rules of baseball and was questioning the mechanics behind a force out—no, for a closer example, it was as if he was trying to insist that the offside rule in soccer was unreasonable.

What's offside? Why aren't you allowed to pass the ball to a place where there's no one from the opposing team? Doesn't it clearly create a chance to shoot if you pass there?

Something like that.

「Hahaha, Saki-chan. If we're going that far, then I'd actually be someone who'd argue about why you're not allowed to use your hands in soccer,」 said Kumagawa-kun, for some reason lowering the value of his words even further. 「Now, answer me, Utsubogi-chan. Why am I not allowed to drain the pool?」

“If Kumagawa-senpai asked this, then Anshin'in-san told me to respond like this. 'It would just be a waste for the water bill, right?'”

「.....」

“.....”

If that was it, then the Student Council President couldn't say anything to refute it.

Or rather—even before the rule had been presented, back when we were just trying to confirm whether the “Hero's Sword” was really at the bottom of the pool or not, Kumagawa-kun himself had said something like that. As if his words had been heard, he'd been forced to commit himself to that statement.

Well, whether he committed himself or not, Kumagawa-kun was naturally the kind of person to go back on his word in an instant.

「It's obviously not a money problem!」

Or rather, he actually got mad.

「Money, money, money... You people are always like that!」

“Um, I don't think we've ever been like that at all... Let's see, when Kumagawa-senpai lashes out like that, then I was told it would be appropriate to respond like this. 'If you remove the water, then it no longer becomes a pool, so Utsubogi-chan will have to take off her swimsuit.'”

「Understood, then I'll have to abide by that rule.」

...It was also very much like Kumagawa-kun to go back on his own anger.

Actually, I'd like to have a manual like that.

This Peace of Mind Kumagawa Countermeasures Plan that this "Anshin'in-san" apparently created—it almost made me want to exchange email addresses with Utsubogi-chan later.

「A gentleman like me can't possibly leave a maiden naked by the side of a pool.」

"Um, I don't think that's what she meant by me having to take off my swimsuit..."

It seemed this manual made by "Anshin'in-san" still had some flaws, but Utsubogi-chan was as cool as ever.

No matter what situation arose, no matter what she was told.

...It was just that, unlike Kumagawa-kun, I was an outsider, and I was the type of person who was too proud to raise quibbles against a rule that was presented to me, so I didn't bring it up, but it certainly bothered me too.

Why was it considered cheating to drain the pool?

Perhaps the "Hero's Sword" really was being compared to Excalibur, and the pool was supposed to be a lake, and you can't really drain a lake—was that it?

Well, that didn't seem right... Maybe it was, plainly and simply, a difficulty adjustment made for the sake of game balance—like a self-imposed restriction.

「A self-imposed restriction... That sounds good to me. I'm not going to lie, I actually like that sort of thing.」

"Um, it's not like you really need to lie about something like that."

「Do you want to talk about who it was that played Dragon Quest IX without any party members?」

"Let's not."

Why was it that this person couldn't form any personal relations even with

NPCs?

〔What's the time limit?〕

“I was told I could decide that to be whatever I want—so let's say you have until school closes for the day. After all, because you halted the Swim Club's activities today, we'll have to make up for it tomorrow via morning training.”

“Until school closes...”

Again?

We'd had to deal with processing some Student Council work after school, and spent a little more time with Kumagawa-kun's revival, so the current time was 4:30.

Until school closed at 6 p.m., only 1 hour and 30 minutes remained.

It was a fairly severe time limit—though the tone of her voice was still cool, perhaps she didn't think too fondly of Kumagawa-kun forcibly halting her club activities.

Well, that was the appropriate reaction to have for a high schooler that worked hard in her club, so I couldn't object. It seemed Kumagawa-kun didn't have any immature complaints, either.

〔Okay,〕 he agreed.

However, watching him so easily accept the terms without any consideration made me uneasy—it seemed Kumagawa-kun actually enjoyed it when he was at a disadvantage, or when he was in a crisis.

Did he just not think about wanting to win?

Even now, it seemed like he was just amusing himself with this game from “Anshin'in-san”—was he able to stay this relaxed because he wasn't concerned about winning or losing?

It was possible.

The first round had been Russian Roulette, and this time Kumagawa-kun

had ended up drowning, which weren't exactly common occurrences, but in the end these were all still "games".

After all, even if he failed to pull out the "Hero's Sword" from the pool, it wouldn't exactly bother anyone—

“—It wouldn't, right? Kumagawa-kun.”

I'd forgotten to check that in the first place.

It was very careless of me.

“There won't be any damages incurred even if you lose this game, right? This is just 'Anshin'in-san' wanting to play with you, right?”

「Well, that's right. Anshin'in-san didn't declare that there would be any punishment games or penalties—so,」 said Kumagawa-kun calmly. 「So if I lose here, it'll end with me just being expelled from Suisou Academy.」

“...Eh?”

He'd said it so casually that at first I only understood that there were "no punishment games or penalties" and felt relieved, but hold on a little, and really, it's only a little, but what did Kumagawa-kun just say?

“Ex... Expelled? You'll be expelled?”

「Huh? Didn't I tell you? That's the condition Anshin'in-san set to get me to participate in the game.」

“No, you didn't...”

I hadn't heard a thing about that. But maybe he did? And maybe I just ignored it? Maybe I'd assumed he was just saying something incomprehensible again...

I never expected there were circumstances like that—wait, wait, let's put this in order. Basically, with the threat of "being expelled from the academy", this "Anshin'in-san" made Kumagawa-kun participate in this game—that's why, yesterday after school, Kumagawa-kun went to visit the classroom of Class 2-3 seat number 18 Teppou Uchi-san and conquered Russian Roulette, and that's why, today after school, right

now, he was after the “Hero’s Sword” that was in the pool.

“.....?”

What was this?

What was this overwhelming sense of discomfort?

In this story, in this tale, it seemed like there was something strange, some sort of unreasonable flaw—ah, I got it, of course.

I didn’t even need to think about it.

I felt uncomfortable and strange at the idea that Kumagawa-kun yielded to the threat of “being expelled from the academy”.

Of course, for any normal high school student—at least, for someone like me, although this could just be my own personal view on the matter—being expelled was a pretty big deal, and most people would probably listen to anything in order to prevent that.

Actually, that was pretty much how the former Student Council President, Jakago Aki-san, ruled over this Suisou Academy—well, in her case, it wasn’t just threats but actually expelling people, so she was even worse.

But this was Kumagawa-kun we were talking about.

This was Kumagawa Misogi.

Why did he yield to a threat like this? If anything, at that point he’d happily leave the academy on his own accord.

Kumagawa-kun’s reason for living was to trample on things that other people “valued”—even if that thing was his own school register.

He was a high schooler with a hobby of burning banknotes in a fireplace and throwing out water in the middle of a desert. But then, why now did he bend to such normal coercion from “Anshin’in-san”?

“Why... Why is that, Kumagawa-kun?”

I couldn’t even grasp at an inkling of an idea, so I had no choice but to ask.

Even if I knew I wouldn't be able to get a decent answer out of him.

[That's obvious, isn't it? It's because I want to be with you, Saki-chan. I love you, and I love Suisou Academy.]

“.....”

It was a response more infuriating than I could've ever imagined.

What is this, the final episode?

If you love it that much, I really will bury you on school grounds.

Realizing that this line of questioning would prove to be fruitless, and realizing that we didn't have the time to waste on this, I decided to properly bring this matter back up tomorrow at the earliest—but right now, we should be focusing on the sword at the bottom of the pool.

On how to pull out the sword stuck in the bottom of the pool.

“Just for reference, Kumagawa-kun. If the pool happened to be drained, do you think you'd be able to pull the 'Hero's Sword' out? You said earlier that it didn't have to do with water pressure or buoyancy. In that case, it shouldn't matter whether you drain the water or not, right?”

[That's right, it has nothing to do with mechanics or physics... That's why I think we should be thinking about pulling it out through a different system or rule... But before that, there's another problem to consider.]

“And what's that?”

[What Anshin'in-san has for 'All Fiction' countermeasures, so to speak.]

“.....?”

“All Fiction” countermeasures?

Countermeasures for Kumagawa-kun's Skill that lets him “make everything as if it never happened”—in other words, something that was a part of that “Kumagawa-kun Countermeasures Plan” that Utsubogi-san had mentioned? But no matter what plan you had, “All Fiction” was a skill

that could make the plan itself as if it “never existed”, so just thinking about it normally, it didn’t seem like something you could make a plan for...

Especially just with the water in a pool.

〔That’s not true, Saki-chan. First and foremost, I can’t swim.〕

Kumagawa-kun stated it pretentiously, as if it were some sort of important piece of classified information—it’s rare to see a person that so pompously declares his physical weaknesses like this.

〔And secondly, I can’t breathe underwater.〕

“...Hm? It doesn’t seem like there’s a big difference between the first and second things?”

I immediately voiced the question that came to mind.

“Isn’t it because you can’t breathe underwater that you can’t swim?”

〔There are people that can swim even though they can’t breathe underwater, right? And anyway, it’s just that it’s easier to understand if you consider these two separately, Saki-chan. Basically, because I can’t swim, it’s already a struggle to make it to the ‘Hero’s Sword’ at the bottom of the pool. And even if I do make it there, it produces a time lag until I can activate ‘All Fiction’ to nullify the system that keeps the sword from being pulled out.〕

“A time lag...”

A time lag until he can activate his Skill.

That could be considered the weak point of all Skill Holders, not just Kumagawa-kun. That was the reason why Skills that were constantly active without needing to be controlled—in other words, the Abnormalities of people who couldn’t exactly be called Skill Holders—that was why they surpassed Skill Holders, who you’d think would be higher in rank.

It was hard to say that Kumagawa-kun actually controlled his “All Fiction”, but regardless of whether we called it control or not, it was true that he himself decided when to use it—naturally, that meant that when he

needed to apply it to the “Hero’s Sword” at the bottom of the pool, he needed to have the will, the intention, to “apply” it.

But, while underwater.

Before being able to have a will or an intention.

〔I end up drowning from that time lag.〕

“.....”

Well, he probably wouldn’t end up drowning every time he tried... But, in both a mental way and a physical way, he surely wouldn’t be able to maintain his composure in such a state.

“Basically, because I’m surrounded by water, I end up panicking and I can’t use my Skill well. You remember, right, Saki-chan? Surely you haven’t already forgotten about our great predecessor, the highly esteemed former President, Jakago Aki-san.”

“Right... Of course I remember.”

Why did you say it in such a roundabout way?

〔Why was it that the Skill she used, 'Aero Biker', such a dominating force? If we consider how she managed to dominate over the many other Skill Holders at the academy as if they were nothing, it would be because her 'Skill that controls oxygen' allows her to freely manipulate the air that surrounds us humans, right?〕

“Hmm... I suppose so.”

To be precise, oxygen only made up about 20 percent of air, but that wasn’t exactly relevant to the comparison Kumagawa-kun was trying to make with Jakago-san’s skill and the current game. Although, if you looked at it another way, you could say that she was able to show that much dominance even with only 20 percent.

If you were surrounded with 100 percent water—then not even Kumagawa-kun would be able to do anything. It surprised me to hear that even that outrageous, out-of-bounds Skill of Kumagawa-kun’s had such a realistic way to counter it.

“So that might be why 'Anshin'in-san' forbid the draining of the pool... Is that right, Utsubogi-san?”

“Even if you ask me, I wouldn't know. My job is just to carry out the game just as Anshin'in-san told me to. It's a simple job that anyone can do.”

Utsubogi-san spoke without a single change in her expression.

Thinking about it, it was pretty impressive that Utsubogi-san, who didn't have any particular Skills (though it was self-proclaimed), maintained such a nonchalant attitude in front of someone like Kumagawa-kun, who owned such a supernatural and villainous Skill.

I could even call it extraordinary—by no means was it a simple job that anyone could do.

“...But, if that's the case, then it would've been fine to just forbid the use of 'All Fiction' itself. Why would she restrict you with a dull, roundabout rule like forbidding you from draining the pool?”

〔There could be another reason. But fundamentally, it's probably just that. That's just another one of Anshin'in-san's tendencies.〕

“A tendency?”

〔Basically, she doesn't like having to remove something from play just because it's a hindrance to her. If I describe her as someone who is overwhelmingly powerful and yet doesn't enjoy power games, then you get it, right, Saki-chan?〕

“No, I don't get it at all...”

What was this guy expecting from me?

〔In that sense, I'm someone who is overwhelmingly powerless and yet doesn't enjoy power games, so there's a mutual understanding there, as well as an incompatibility. Well, if you still don't get it at all, then think about it like this. When Anshin'in-san hears, 'It would've been fine if you'd just done this', she's the kind of person that responds like this.〕

At that point, Kumagawa-kun changed his tone of voice.

Perhaps he was trying to do an imitation, but because I wasn't familiar with the person herself, I had no way of knowing if it resembled her or not—although, from what I could imagine from the nuance that Utsubogi-san had given when quoting Anshin'in-san's words earlier, I felt like it didn't resemble her.

「Then it wouldn't be interesting, right?—」

“.....”

「Well, that's what's cool about Anshin'in-san, but it's also where she shows an opening—in my opinion, it's one of Anshin'in-san's weaknesses. That's how I managed to succeed in sealing Anshin'in-san.」

“If,” said Utsubogi-san, suddenly speaking up. “If you're going to say that Anshin'in-san has weaknesses, then I can't overlook that—please take it back.”

Wow. This was a surprise.

I never thought Utsubogi-san, the embodiment of coolness itself, would make such an appeal to Kumagawa-kun—but it's not like saying that would make Kumagawa-kun take his words back, although I'm sure she was already aware of that.

「Ahaha. I see, so 'that' is your weakness. Interesting—I'd love to play with you a little more about that, but I don't have the time right now.」

“.....”

「I don't want to be expelled from this Suisou Academy that I love, that I'd even attend on Sundays, so I have to keep playing this game—I have to finish this quest. And I'd like to ask this just for reference, Utsubogi-chan.」

“...What is it?”

Though her appeal was so casually rejected, it didn't seem like Utsubogi-san planned to raise any more complaints, as she acknowledged Kumagawa-kun's question.

Unlike Teppou-san, she took this rather seriously.

The impertinent Teppou-san and the all-too-serious Utsubogi-san...

Whether you described it as a marked contrast or complete opposites, what Kumagawa-kun had said was true: the underlings of this “Anshin’in-san” really had a lot of variety.

With so much individuality in each person, it felt questionable to me that they’d be able to maintain any kind of organization—although, before that, I found it hard to believe that they had even formed any kind of organization in the first place.

Even if 700 million was a joke, using the expression of, what was it again, terminals? That could imply that it was something more like a network. But not necessarily a pyramid-shaped community that had “Anshin’in-san” at the top...

「You called this the first quest, right? Saying it like this really makes me realize the long road I have ahead of me, but really, how many quests are there exactly?」

“To that question, I was told to respond like this—‘The number of quests you have, in total, is four.’”

“Four...”

In other words (treating Russian Roulette with Teppou-san as the zeroth quest, effectively), the first quest was “Find the ‘Hero’s Sword’!”, and the second, third, and fourth quests were to come in the future.

And among those three remaining quests, we could predict that one of them involved the event of using the “Hero’s Sword” he would obtain in the first quest to cut down “something”... So what were the other two?

「Huhu. Well, there’s no point in thinking about what’ll happen next, Saki-chan. Since, of course, I need to clear the first quest—and it’s possible that, even if that was the information that Anshin’in-san fed to Utsubogi-chan, it may not be the truth. It’s possible that there’s a postgame with a fifth and a sixth quest, too.」

“Ah, is that so... I see.”

Since there was no rule about this, it was perfectly within the range of possibility for the game to be changed later. Besides, recently it's become more common for games to have longer playtimes after clearing the game.

「Ahaha. Not to mention the types of games that just go on endlessly and can't be cleared.」

Kumagawa-kun was suggesting a rather terrifying future.

「Anyway, next question, Utsubogi-chan,」 he said, moving the conversation along. 「Is draining the pool the only thing that's against the rules? Isn't there anything else that Anshin'in-san forbid me from doing when trying to pull out the 'Hero's Sword'? I don't want to hear you go, 'You can't do this' and 'You can't do that' after the fact, so if there's more, I'd like you to tell me about it in advance.」

“Don't worry. Anshin'in-san isn't someone that throws their hand in rock-paper-scissors late.”

「Hahaha. If you're going to say that, then Anshin'in-san isn't someone that plays rock-paper-scissors at all.」

He said it with the same feeling of the expression, “God does not play dice”.

If a character like that was going to appear, then it felt like the game balance would crumble just from that.

「So, how about it?」

“There is nothing else,” she declared.

It was a definitive statement with no room for interpretation and no opportunity for late throws.

“When it comes to pulling out the 'Hero's Sword' from the bottom of the pool, there is only one act considered cheating—and that's 'draining the pool'. You are free to do anything outside of that.”

「Free to do anything, huh?」

Kumagawa-kun seemed to be wary as he confirmed that.

“Yes. You are free to do anything. You are allowed to do whatever you want.”

〔So does that mean I'm free to flip over Saki-chan's skirt as many times as I want?〕

She obviously meant that it was within the limits of common sense!

If you had that level of freedom, it wouldn't even be a game.

“If you believe that will help you pull out the 'Hero's Sword', then go ahead.”

“You shouldn't just say 'go ahead' like that, too!”

〔Haha. This is kind of a pain, so I was thinking about giving up and spending the rest of my time until the time limit looking at Saki-chan's panties, but if that's no good, then I may as well try giving this a shot.〕

He said it was a pain...

As I thought, Kumagawa-kun didn't really have any attachment to Suisou Academy at all.

That was what went through my mind at that time.

〔So the only forbidden act is draining the pool, huh—but even so, it's not like that means I can do anything. I'm limited by what I can actually do in practice. Saki-chan, what time is it right now?〕

“Eh?”

Being asked, I turned to look at the clock.

While we were talking about various things, the time had continued to elapse, and it was a little past 4:45—just 1 hour and 15 minutes to go. Taking into account the time it would take to actually go and pull out the “Hero's Sword”, there was just about 1 hour left to work out a plan to clear the quest.

〔Is that so? One hour, huh—if I couldn't drain the pool, I was wondering

if I could just wait for the sunlight to evaporate all the water, but I don't think I can go with that plan.]

"What a leisurely plan!"

Far from taking an hour, that would take over a year.

Although, if we waited a year then rain would definitely fall, so I felt like it was impossible no matter how much you waited—or rather, Kumagawa-kun probably said that as a joke in the first place, but even to that, the all-too-serious Utsubogi-san responded.

"I can't acknowledge a method like that," she said, denying it.

How serious.

"Please don't try to find a loophole in my words—draining the pool should be interpreted in the broadest sense of the term. In other words, any action that involves removing the water from the pool should be considered cheating. This is the only rule about cheating there is, so I'd like it if you could follow at least this much."

[Hahaha, of course I'll follow it. I've never once broken a rule in my entire life. Well, either way I can't use this evaporation strategy, so putting that aside—however, when it comes to my second-best plan of getting scuba diving gear from somewhere, I don't think that's possible in 1 hour, either... Well, just in case, Saki-chan, do we have a Diving Club somewhere in this school?]

"We don't..."

The idea of using an oxygen tank to go underwater... That was also pretty on-the-nose. Although, it seemed like neither Kumagawa-kun nor "Anshin'in-san" were aiming for something that was on-the-nose...

Hm.

In that case, what was Kumagawa-kun aiming for?

And not just in this game.

What was he aiming for when he became Student Council President—

「...For now, let's return to the Student Council office, Saki-chan. I won't be able to think of anything in this concrete jungle, at this dreary poolside,」 said Kumagawa-kun.

Calling the poolside a concrete jungle was also a pretty weird thing to do.

「We'll come back in an hour, Utsubogi-chan. Until then, well, go ahead and swim around however you want.」

“...If you don't manage to pull out the 'Hero's Sword' after an hour, will you agree to taking back your thoughtless remark about Anshin'in-san having weaknesses?”

That was what she said.

That was what Utsubogi-san said.

At this unexpected demand from his kouhai, Kumagawa-kun was silent for a moment.

「.....」

But after that, he finally spoke, with a smile on his face.

「Of course, I don't mind. If that happens, I'll make it as if my statement never happened.」

■ ■ ■

「Saki-chan. Did you know that water is neither colorless nor transparent?」

“Eh?”

I was just able to catch my breath after having returned to the Student Council office with Kumagawa-kun when he suddenly brought up this subject.

As always, he started his conversations incoherently.

I didn't expect it to lead to any sort of hint for pulling out the “Hero's

Sword", but since there wasn't anything else to talk about for the time being...

"Water is colorless and transparent, isn't it?"

I decided to play along.

"It's not like it's juice—there's no color at all. If it's not transparent, then what color is it supposed to be?"

「Light blue.」 [?]

"....."

I ended up glaring at him with the feeling of, what kind of awful quiz were you just subjecting me to? But Kumagawa-kun waved his hand.

「No, no, it's not a joke, it's actually light blue. You know, the ocean is blue, right?」

"Hm?"

It was true that the ocean was blue—huh?

No, that was pretty much the same as how we sometimes used "blue" and sometimes used "green" to refer to the color on a traffic light—ah, but, even if that's true, did that mean it still wasn't transparent?

"Isn't it that the ocean turned into a deep green color because it was polluted by humans?"

「That incredible way of thinking could even make me blue in the face... If all of that was a result of pollution, then humanity would have ended long ago. Even if we don't consider the ocean, think about the pool we just saw. The water in that pool was just slightly blue, wasn't it?」

"....."

Now that he said that.

Well, no, it was hard to definitively say that the water was "blue"—but taking into account pools in general, they did have that image of having some blueness.

"That's... Isn't that because the bottom of the pool is blue?"

〔Haha. For you to come up with something like that, I can't help but say that your butt is still too blue to be my assistant.〕 [?]

He can't help but say that?

He just wanted to say something clever... Or rather, no matter how much he wanted to be clever, it's not particularly polite to make reference to a girl's butt.

"To begin with, I'm not your assistant or anything anyway."

〔No need to feel ashamed. Basically, it's a fact that water is 'slightly blue'. It's hard to tell when there's only a little bit, but when you have a lot, it becomes easier to see the color—however, no matter how obvious that color is, people surprisingly don't notice it.〕

"....."

〔And, like that, I feel like the solution to this quest has already been made obvious—and even though the solution is dangling right in front of my face, I can't figure it out, and Anshin'in-san must be laughing at me because of that.〕

"That... Is that yet another tendency of this 'Anshin'in-san'?"

〔Yep.〕

"Well... You know her pretty well, don't you?"

It was something that was hard to comment on, so I gave a rather noncommittal response. Tinged with a bit of doubt.

"But Kumagawa-kun, isn't it about time to stop thinking about just her 'tendencies' and start thinking about measures to deal with those 'tendencies'?"

〔If there were measures like that, then I wouldn't be having this much trouble—even if I can see her weak points, if I don't have any screws that I can screw her with, then it just ends with me being able to look at her but not lay a hand on her.〕

“In that case, even if you know her ‘weak points’,” I said, being reminded of Usubogi-san’s obstinate insistence that “Anshin’in-san” had no weaknesses. “Doesn’t it just not change anything?”

〔Well, it’s not like that. For example, even if I can’t touch them, it still makes me happy to be able to look at boobs, right?〕

“What an easy example to understand...”

Going from meeting the all-too-serious Usubogi-san to dealing with Kumagawa-kun’s frivolous chatter that never went in a serious direction was giving me vertigo—it wasn’t like I was Kumagawa-kun from this morning, but it felt like I was getting a headache.

“This is just what I thought, Kumagawa-kun, but do you think it’s no good to use ‘All Fiction’ to make the water as if it never existed?”

〔That would be cheating, of course. Regardless of how you do it, it still counts as ‘removing’ the water from the pool, so it goes against the rule of ‘no draining’.〕

Kumagawa-kun curtly quashed my proposal.

Although it was more like he squashed it.

〔Really, how can you think of such cowardly means? Did you think that Anshin’in-san or Usubogi-chan would accept it if you cleared the quest like that? You should really learn a little more kindness.〕

“.....”

And who was this for?

Who did you think I was doing this for?

No, there was no use getting mad here.

Kumagawa-kun was just that kind of useless guy.

If I didn’t act like an adult here, then time would just continue to pass—regardless of anything, in order to preserve the peace of this Suisou Academy, someone needed to stand at the top, no matter who it was.

There was no reason for it to specifically have to be Kumagawa-kun, but as long as there was no one who could take his place, it would be troublesome if he decided to quit being the Student Council President.

Regardless of the expectations of Kumagawa-kun himself or this "Anshin'in-san", it just wouldn't do to have Kumagawa-kun leave this academy.

"Should we go over the details once more?" I said, calming down and trying to channel Utsubogi-san's coolness. "The security, so to speak, that prevents you from pulling out the 'Hero's Sword' is twofold. The first one is simply the water in the pool, and the second is the system in the sword itself, where 'only the chosen one can pull it out'—however, as for the latter, Kumagawa-kun can nullify it with 'All Fiction'. Is that correct?"

It was against the rules to make the water in the pool as if it "never existed" using "All Fiction", but making that part of the security system as if it "never existed" should still be within the rules.

In other words, there was actually only one barrier of security.

The pool in the water—it was just that.

「So in this Suisou Academy, it's water that's our great enemy.」 [?]

"And you don't need to keep trying to be clever."

「Anyway, what to do about this?」

"Kumagawa-kun, how about this?" I said.

Even as I expected that he would rudely quash it again, that he'd trample and stomp all over me, I decided to try throwing out yet another idea that I had, not knowing what could be useful as a hint for Kumagawa-kun.

"It should be pretty hard to get together the tools needed for scuba diving within an hour, but couldn't we find some items that are similar and use those?"

「Some similar items?」

“Right. I thought about it a little. Really, it was only a little—for example, if we ask members of the Gardening Club, I think they’ll let us borrow a long hose.”

「A long hose?」

“That’s right.”

「And what would you use that for?」

“Well, you could put it up to your mouth, and when you enter the pool, it’ll keep you from swallowing water or preventing you from breathing, so you can take your time and focus on pulling out the ‘Hero’s Sword’, right?”

「.....」

Kumagawa-kun was silent.

Perhaps he was imagining himself entering the pool with a hose to his mouth—it was true that it didn’t seem cool at all.

「...Well, at this point, there’s no point in being fixated on appearances too much, Saki-chan. But would such a risky plan actually work? It’s something you often see in manga, but can you actually breathe through a hose? I feel like I’ve heard before that the ninja art of water-escape is not actually physically possible... And a straw has a fixed length, so you’d need even more lung capacity for a hose, right?」

“That’s something you’ll need to overcome with willpower, Kumagawa-kun.”

「If I ended up relying on willpower, then Kumagawa Misogi would be doomed—but before that, Saki-chan. You can swim, can’t you?」

“Mm... Well, as much as anyone else, I guess? So yes...”

I couldn’t say I was good at it, but I was good enough to not have any problems in class.

“But what about it?”

「They say that people who can swim can’t understand how it feels to be a person that can’t swim. Even if I managed to be able to breathe, there’s

still the problem of me panicking from being surrounded by water.]

“Ah...”

「It might be different if I was well-equipped like a diver, and it might actually be a little fun. Even if I can't swim, I do like scuba diving.」

“You sure are a weirdo... If you can't even swim at that level, then why did you even enter the pool so defenselessly? I was almost certain that you knew the procedures for swimming with clothes on.”

「Well, the point of that was so that I could sink down, after all.」

So it was.

Why do you not value your own life like this?

“In that case, the hose-snorkeling plan is a no-go... But Kumagawa-kun, right now, it's just that you can't use 'All Fiction' because you're panicking from the water, but it's still possible for you to lay your hands on the 'Hero's Sword', right? You managed to touch it, grab the hilt, and try pulling on it, right? Since in the beginning, you just thought that you'd be able to sink down even without being able to swim and then pick up the sword.”

「That's right. Although the weight of the sword also matters.」

“How weak do you have to be to not be able to carry a single sword, Kumagawa-kun...”

「Don't say it like that. Even in water, the weight of metal can be surprisingly heavy—so? With that as the assumption, what's your next idea, Saki-chan? I'll hear you out.」

“Oh, shut up!”

I spoke without thinking.

But as we had this conversation, the time had become a little past 5 o'clock—even though we hadn't made any progress at all, there was less than an hour left until the school's closing time.

It wasn't the time to get infuriated by Kumagawa-kun's shameless, I'm-

not-going-to-think-for-myself attitude.

“Then, maybe you can go once into the pool with a rope or something, or even a vinyl string used to tie magazines together, and then tie it around the hilt. Then you can come out of the water and use the rope or string to pull the sword out from the poolside like a game of tug-of-war.”

〔Saki-chan, your ideas really all are lacking in stylishness, aren’t they... You’re turning this Arthurian legend into ‘The Gigantic Turnip’.]

“Kumagawa-kun, aren’t you being a little too strict on me!?”

〔No, no, I’ll properly evaluate it. It’s true that with that method, we can avoid the barrier of water—not a firewall, but a waterwall. However...〕

Kumagawa-kun pulled out a screw from somewhere.

And then he pointed that screw at me.

〔In that case, the second barrier comes back into play. The system that the ‘Hero’s Sword’ itself has, that allows only the chosen one to pull it out.〕

“? What do you mean?”

〔If I try to pull it out from that position, then I can’t use ‘All Fiction’. In other words, my ‘All Fiction’ can’t reach the bottom of the pool from the poolside. It’s too far.〕

“Ah, is that so... Since you’re not touching it directly...”

So it can’t pass through the rope or something like that.

〔Well, it’s not so strict a Skill that I need to touch things directly... But at the very least, I need to have the ‘Hero’s Sword’ within my field of vision. If I just use a rope, then the surface of the water is too reflective to see the sword.〕

“It’s surprisingly hard to use, that ‘All Fiction’.”

Perhaps it was a slip of the tongue as a result of being pressed for time, but Kumagawa-kun himself ended up admitting the unreliability of his

Skill.

「That's for sure. It's extremely user-unfriendly,」 he said. 「I can't take it back, either—well, if I have to say it, then it's kind of like a magic trick. If I really wanted to cheat, then I could make the very concept of time itself as if it 'never existed', so that the time limit of 6 p.m. never arrives, which means that technically I would never lose, but what do you think, Saki-chan?」

“I don't think you should do that.”

「Then I won't.」

Kumagawa-kun obediently listened to what I said—although I had no intention of conceitedly thinking that he did actually listen to what I said. It was probably just another one of Kumagawa-kun's characteristic whims.

Kumagawa-kun would choose not to destroy the world simply because there was a TV show he wanted to watch in the evening—

“So it doesn't seem like we can stray from the route of breaking through the first barrier without using 'All Fiction', and then breaking through the second with 'All Fiction'.”

「I just thought of something.」

“Hm?”

「For example, Saki-chan, the water in that pool... Since it's pool water, it's disinfected with chlorine, right?」

The topic suddenly changed, so I hesitated for a moment, but if that was the question, then the answer could be nothing but yes.

「Then, strictly speaking, it isn't water, but chlorinated water, so do you think I'd be able to get away with that logic to drain it from the pool?」

“Of course not... You're just splitting hairs. In Japanese, the word for water doesn't strictly mean H₂O, because it can also refer to liquids in general. So with that in mind, you can't do anything about it, right?”

「In that case, Saki-chan. Do you know about concrete?」

"Huh? I mean, of course I know about it... Since the side of the pool and the bottom of the pool that the sword is stuck in are both concrete. But what about it?"

〔If you can mix chlorine in it and still call it water, then isn't it fine if you mix in cement or sand, too?〕

"Eh...?"

I was dumbfounded for a moment at such an incomprehensible statement, but I soon managed to understand what he meant.

"Wait... Don't tell me, Kumagawa-kun, you're planning on solidifying the pool with concrete? Um..."

Well, it was true that if he did that, it wasn't necessarily "draining" the "water"—the water may have undergone a chemical reaction with the cement, but it still remained in the pool.

He'd probably be able to get away with that logic.

However..

"There are two problems I can think of. The first is, how do you plan on preparing that much cement or sand within an hour, or within almost 40 minutes? And the second is, even if you did manage to procure it, how would you manage to dig out the 'Hero's Sword' from the concrete in the remaining amount of time?"

〔Don't be like thaaat, nitpicking an idea that I finally managed to come up with.〕

"That's all you've been doing to me up until now, though..."

However, it wasn't exactly admirable to deny something without providing an alternative plan—just because Kumagawa-kun himself was the worst didn't mean that I should follow in his footsteps.

"It doesn't have to be cement, right? What about dirt? If you just need dirt, there's plenty of it on school grounds. Even if there's no chemical reaction, it would still become muddy."

Although a pool that was full of mud sounded pretty disastrous.

「Humans can still drown in mud, can't they, Saki-chan? Even if we put aside the amount of time it would take to get enough dirt to make a poolful of mud... According to Aristotle's principle, the water would end up overflowing from the pool, wouldn't it?」 [?]

“Oh yeah, if the water overflows, then it would be treated the same as draining the pool...”

Since it was a pool, I was sure they'd overlook it if a little bit of water splashed out, but if a large enough amount of water spilled over, that would surely end up being treated as draining.

Then it was the same as the concrete idea.

“...Normally, you'd think the second barrier would be the harder one to deal with, but this first barrier is surprisingly tough, isn't it?”

Well.

This would be an easy problem to solve if Kumagawa-kun just knew how to swim, but it was probably better if I didn't say that.

「Saki-chan. I just thought of something else.」

“What is it this time?”

Even as I thought that it was yet another unusable idea, that it would just waste more time, I knew that I couldn't reject it without hearing it out (as much as I wanted to), so I responded.

「Or rather, I just remembered something. The former Student Council President, um, what was her name again? That unremarkable person, something about a snake.」 [?]

“.....”

Could you perhaps be talking about the person you had, just moments ago, described as our great predecessor, the highly esteemed former President, Jakago Aki-san?

「Right, that Jakago-san, Miss Snakebasket. But there was a girl that

worked under her, that girl named Kejukuri Tou-san. The girl that worked as the General Affairs Manager in the Jakago Student Council. The girl whose father is now a retired politician and runs a bakery together with her mother, and whose little sister is now a fifth-grader in elementary school, that Kejukuri Tou-san. The girl whose hobby is researching magnets, and even published a paper on it overseas.]

“Hold on, how do you even know so much about my predecessor...”

He'd even listed information that I hadn't been aware of.

It was a little scary.

「Her Skill, 'Quarter Hazard', was a 'Skill that manipulates water', right? What if we went and bowed our heads to her and asked her to use that Skill so that we didn't have to deal with the water in the pool?」

“Um... I think the idea of 'changing the volume of the water' might not work. In the end, that's technically the same as draining the water, so I think it'll be considered cheating.”

At this point, let's just shelve the idea of whether or not Kejukuri-san would even listen to our request—thinking about it normally, since she wasn't even a Student Council officer anymore, so she probably would have returned home already, so that was yet another reason to shelve it.

“In any case, if we can't win over the facilitator of this quest... Not even taking into account 'Anshin'in-san', if we can't persuade Utsubogi-san, then it won't work, right?”

「You're right—so even if it's my girlfriend, it would be against the rules to borrow someone else's power...」

For some reason, in Kumagawa-kun's head, Kejukuri-san was being treated as his girlfriend—I felt sorry for this daydreamer (although the one I really felt sorry for was Kejukuri-san).

「If that's the case, then it looks like I have no one else to turn to but you, Saki-chan.」

“Sorry, but there's nothing about what you just said that I didn't find disgusting.”

「Oh, hold on. In the sense that she's also a related party, I wonder if I can get the facilitator, Utsubogi-chan herself, to cooperate with me...」

Showing no concern at all to my protests, Kumagawa-kun continued his line of thought—eh? What was this guy saying now? He was going to ask for help from Utsubogi-san...?

“There's no way... Since it looked like Utsubogi-san really despised you, Kumagawa-kun.”

「Eh? Wasn't that just another case of how saying no is actually an expression of fondness?」

“Kumagawa-kun, you should just go and die. Ah, sorry, that was a slip of the tongue. Just think of what I just said as an expression of fondness.”

「It just sounds like begrudging fondness to me, though...」

“But, let's just say, even in the off chance that Utsubogi-san did cooperate with you, would it really change anything? After all, she doesn't have a Skill like Kejukuri-san's, right? At least, according to her. Unless you're saying that that's a lie?”

「Don't be silly, she's not the kind of girl that would tell lies.」

He was the type of guy to have a rough time being strung along by girls.

Or rather, I really wanted him to have a rough time.

“Well, even if she doesn't have a Skill, it's pretty impressive that she could be like that in front of you—that she could remain calm and composed like that. Her mentality is impressive, I mean.”

「In that case, I'd like to test how much she can maintain that coolness of hers.」

“.....?”

「You see, I just happen to love when cute girls get all hot and bothered. Since the other side is coming at me with the combination of an English chivalry tale and a line from Chinese classics, I'll respond in turn with an ancient Japanese idea. Though I can't pull the 'Hero's Sword' out by

myself, I'm sure if you and I and Utsubogi-chan all work together, the three of us will be able to pull it out.]

With that, Kumagawa-kun stood from his seat.

Um, no, I couldn't just overlook your intentions to make Utsubogi-san all hot and bothered, and in the first place, that Japanese tale was not about a "sword" but "arrows", and it was a tale about how those "arrows" didn't break—you could've just said that three heads are better than one. [?]

But anyway, the current time was 5:30.

Considering the amount of time it took to return to the pool, we were nearly at the time limit. Unfortunately, at this point, as unwilling as I was, it seemed like I had to play along with Kumagawa-kun's idea.

〔There's no more time, so we'll have to go right into it without any preparations. Saki-chan, I'm counting on you for some good ad-libs. Ahaha, even if I can't become a hero, I still have a pretty reliable companion, don't I?〕

"You're just trying to say something clever again..."

〔Oh, and Saki-chan. Here,〕 he said.

Kumagawa-kun walked over to me and handed me a large screw.

It was the screw that Kumagawa-kun always used.

"? What's this?"

〔Hold onto this. I get the feeling you'll need it.〕

■ ■ ■

And so we returned to the pool.

Apparently, someone had not taken well to Kumagawa-kun's parting remark about the poolside being "dreary", as when we returned, it had for some reason become decorated with flowers.

It seemed like a pain to clean up, though...

Usubogi-san, who seemed to be acting as if it was completely unrelated to her even though she was obviously the culprit behind this, greeted Kumagawa-kun and me with folded arms.

“...Have you figured out a method? Kumagawa-senpai.”

Cool to the very end.

Her exposed arms and legs still had flower petals on them, but her coolness almost made me forget all that.

“There’s only 15 minutes left until the time limit.”

「Is that so? Only 15 minutes, huh. Then I’d better hurry. Since I need time to dig it out, too,」 said Kumagawa-kun, ignoring the poolside that Usubogi-san had worked hard to decorate and instead sitting down by the edge of the pool.

Time to dig it out?

What did that mean... Did that mean that he’d decided on the concrete plan in the end? There were still a lot of flaws to that plan, though—in the first place, would a poolful of concrete even harden in just 15 minutes?

“Um, Kumagawa-kun...”

I tried to speak up, but Kumagawa-kun had already dipped his hand into the water—both of his hands, in fact. It looked like he was trying to gradually get his body used to the water again, but he wasn’t using his feet, so what was he doing?

Was he going to wash his face?

It wasn’t like he had even done anything that warranted washing his face for a fresh start... Or perhaps what he wanted was to cool his head?

“...? What are you doing, Kumagawa-senpai?”

Usubogi-san also appeared to be curious, as she walked over to where Kumagawa-kun was, her arms still folded.

「Utsubogi-chan. I have a request for you.」

“A request?”

Utsubogi-san tilted her head.

So did I.

It was true that, as he was now, it almost looked like Kumagawa-kun was prostrating himself before Utsubogi-san, although he wasn't facing her directly.

「According to my instincts, the 'Hero's Sword' should be pulled out about halfway right about now—can you go take a look for me?」

“Eh?”

It wasn't enough to throw her off of her coolness—but Utsubogi-san still showed a surprised expression upon hearing that.

“There's no way—how? What did you do?”

「Well, I don't think I'm obligated to explain that to you. It should be fine as long as I pull the sword out, right?」

“.....”

Hearing that, Utsubogi-san turned her gaze towards the center of the pool—but of course, since the surface of the pool was reflective, you wouldn't be able to tell anything just by looking. Even if you could catch glimpses of it, it would be impossible to notice a small detail like it being pulled out halfway.

“All Fiction'... Did you use it? To tamper with the water in the pool somehow?”

「Like I said, I'm not obligated to explain it... Well, if you want to know, I don't mind telling you later, but right now I'm running out of time. The 'Hero's Sword' should get pulled out in just about 10 minutes, so it'll really be cutting it close. So can you please go and confirm it for me? That's within the range of your responsibilities as the facilitator, right?」

“...Understood.”

Utsubogi-san nodded and began to do some light stretching.

“However, even if it’s partially pulled out, I won’t do anything like pull it out for you.”

〔Of course, I don’t expect that from you at all. It’s fine if you just take a look at it.〕

? Was it really all right?

He did say that he was going to ask for Utsubogi-san’s cooperation, but was that level of cooperation really all right—because if that was all, then even I could’ve done something like that. Ah, but I was still in my uniform, so I couldn’t enter the pool, could I.

However, that wasn’t just it.

What Kumagawa-kun wanted wasn’t something I could have done even if I were wearing a swimsuit—and something only Utsubogi-san could have done, even if she weren’t wearing a swimsuit.

Utsubogi-san put her two hands together.

And swiftly dove into the water.

It was at that moment.

The entirety of the water that filled up the pool, in an instant, really in the blink of an eye—*froze over*.

The whole surface.

Turned into ice.

“Eh... Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeehhhhh!?”

I unconsciously let out a scream of confusion and shock—to think that the

entire pool would freeze over as soon as Utsubogi-san dove in!

「It's what they call, supercooling, you see.」

Kumagawa-kun slowly stood back up as he spoke.

It seemed that he'd shrewdly removed his hands from the pool at some point—and, with that, he took a step onto the pool.

He began to walk on the frozen ice.

Without sinking, and especially without drowning.

Supercooling... If I remembered correctly, if you put a bottle full of water in the freezer and cool it down calmly without any sort of shock to the system, then the water would remain in liquid form even past the freezing point. But when you introduced a shock to it, then the water would freeze up in an instant. Was that what he meant?

He'd performed supercooling.

On a pool of this scale?

「Basically—from the water of the pool, I made its 'temperature' as if it never existed.」

Kumagawa-kun began to explain as he walked over the ice.

「By taking away only the 'temperature' of the water, it basically became the ultimate way of cooling it down calmly, which just happened to accidentally supercool it, you see. So in order to freeze it over, I needed some way to shock the system.」

“You needed some way...”

Don't tell me...

Utsubogi-san's dive...?

So Kumagawa-kun had noticed her “tendency” of entering the pool by diving in, all the way back when he had been drowning... No way, he utilized Utsubogi-san’s beautiful, breathtaking dive for a purpose like that...?

Ah, but if I remembered correctly, when you wanted to take a bottle of water that underwent “supercooling” and freeze it in one go, you could drop a marble into the water—in that case, was the role of the marble taken up by Utsubogi-san...?

So saying that the sword was about halfway out was just an excuse to get her to dive in... Or rather, it was just a big fat lie!

How could this person do something like that to a girl!?

You can’t just pretend it was an accident!

〔What are you saying? It’s the lifelong dream of any boy to be able to preserve a beautiful girl in ice.〕

He wasn’t even showing any signs of guilt.

In fact, he almost seemed boastful.

〔Water is quite a strange liquid, after all, since its volume increases when it freezes. But although it’s in a solid state, as you can see—even if it rises out of the water, it doesn’t spill over or overflow. So it wouldn’t fall under the definition of “draining”, right?〕

Indeed... Even if it had turned into “ice”, the “water” was still “water” in the end—it was even more of a direct approach than hardening it with cement or mixing it into mud.

Without even needing to add anything.

Just by subtracting something—he achieved his goal.

It was very much a Minus worthy of Kumagawa-kun.

〔Come on, Saki-chan. What are you doing, just standing around?〕

“Eh?”

With the conversation suddenly turning to me, I couldn't help but be puzzled—or rather, in the first place, I hadn't exactly recovered from my confusion yet.

But Kumagawa-kun continued on, regardless.

〔I'm going to have my hands full digging into the ice to pull out the 'Hero's Sword'—so you should get to work in digging out Utsubogi-san already. I couldn't care less about that beautiful girl, but if you don't help her soon, she'll probably die.〕

“Ah!”

So that was it!

So that was why he gave me the screw...!

At the center of the pool, Kumagawa-kun had already begun to chip away at the ice beneath him with another one of his screws—even though it was solid, it was still ice, so it couldn't even compare to concrete regarding how easy it was to dig into. For this much ice, it seemed like he'd be able to manage to reach the “Hero's Sword” to use “All Fiction” on it within the remaining 10 minutes until time was up.

It was a brilliant quest clear.

At least, that's how it seemed.

However, the same surely didn't apply for Utsubogi-san, who'd ended up being forced to bear the worst part of the supercooling—I wasn't sure if I'd be able to dig her out of the ice in time, before she froze to death or suffocated.

“Wa, waaah! Utsubogi-saaan!”

Figuring out the point where she had dived into the pool, I began to dig into the ice in a panic, using the screw that Kumagawa-kun had given me as an ice pick.

“I'll get you out soon, so stay calm!”

〔Hahaha. Team play really is beautiful to see, isn't it? People who were

once hostile end up becoming people that work together, that's truly the greatest joy of shonen manga.]

Kumagawa-kun made an exaggerated display of shrugging his shoulders.

Even as he continued to chip away at the ice, he spoke exceedingly cheerfully, like it was a breath of fresh air.

[Although it seems like Utsubogi-san remained as cool as ice to the very end—and you really are cute, Saki-chan, when you get all hot and bothered.]

■ ■ ■

And so, Kumagawa Misogi obtained the “Hero’s Sword”.

That put Kumagawa-kun one step closer to his defeat.

Anshin'in-san's Peace of Mind Terminal Introduction ②

I personally didn't want the all-too-serious Utsubogi to have a hard time, so my intention was just for her to be the facilitator of the game, but it seems like she ended up having a hard time regardless. Kumagawa-kun sure is merciless. But if it's a man's dream to preserve a beautiful girl in ice, then it would have to be a woman's dream to be frozen in ice while they're still beautiful, so I'm sure this will all end up being a beautiful memory. Yes, in three thousand years or so. Incidentally, Kumagawa-kun's method of freezing the pool water after supercooling it was quite different from the clearing method that I'd expected. Actually, who would even expect such a large-scale action? Kumagawa-kun really is unpredictable in that sense. In that case, what might my suggested answer for clearing this quest be? I'm sure it will end up being revealed in the next volume.

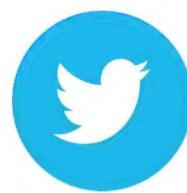




Utsubogi Mei
Class 1-3
Blood type AB
Seat number 23

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